S: Mitchell E-5 (1946-1948) 1949 FT7 Yao FT7

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DARYLL FORDE

Assistant Editor
R. E. WYATT

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authorities to-day: those of the British administration. Yet the headman is a key official, if usually unpaid, in that administration. For example, he has to report suspicious deaths and illnesses and strangers, and he has to see that his villagers keep the village clean, have paths, use latrines, follow agricultural and veterinary regulations, pay tax, &c. He is no more ready than they are to accept these as good, but he tries to enforce the rules for he is liable to be punished if he does not, by fining, imprisonment, and ultimately deposition. As he applies these unwelcome and unaccepted rules, his position becomes subject to still greater strain.

II. THE YAO OF SOUTHERN NYASALAND

J. C. MITCHELL

THE Yao people were notorious at the end of last century because of their reputation as slavers. Livingstone had noted their close association with the Arabs in this trade and much of the effort of the early administrators of Nyasaland was directed to suppressing the slaving activities of the Yao. While the slave trade has been fairly well studied, the associated but different phenomenon of domestic slavery has not been nearly so thoroughly investigated. It seems that domestic slavery was an important part of the Yao social structure in those days, before the coming of the white man abolished at one stroke this and many other social institutions. But, though the institution of domestic slavery ceased to exist, the system of values upon which it was built still survives and still affects the social structure of the modern Yao. We might summarize this system of values by saying that the status of a man depends on the number of people over whom he exercises certain rights and for whom, in turn, he is responsible. In the past, a man could increase his status in the community by acquiring slaves. This he did by buying them with values obtained through the slave trade, or with ivory, beeswax, tobacco, and other natural products; by taking them in compensation for the death of a relative; or simply by kidnapping them. Slaves were often taken as spouses by the members of the group over which the man exercised his command, or by the man himself as wives, and thus the group was further enlarged by natural increase. Though these slaves and slave-children had fairly well-defined rights, they were not free to leave the command of their owner, and the group was from that point of view a stable one. The leader's command over his matrilineal and other relatives, however, was not so absolute and it is with this aspect of the social structure that I am here concerned. This system of values still persists and forms the basis for evaluating the status of men in the Yao community. The high status of a village headman is usually expressed in such terms as: 'He is a big man—he has many people', or 'he has many huts'. The village headman himself and the men under him are motivated by the same system of values so that in any village at any time there is a balance between the desire of certain members of that village to break away and establish units with their own dependants, and the desire of the headman to retain those people under his charge.

The tensions that exist in this situation are well recognized by the Yao and they always express them explicitly during the ceremonial succession to village headman-

ship. The difficulties of his position are brought home to the neophyte village headman in speeches made by old and experienced men. On one such occasion I heard a man say, 'Some men who marry into a village are bad and can split a village like this one by telling lies to the headman, saying that his sisters are talking behind his back and are insulting him. When a headman hears all this he might break his village by ill-treating his relatives, thus causing himself to be left all alone.' In this way the headman's responsibility for maintaining harmonious relations between the members of the village and himself is emphasized. His failure to do so results in what they call a break in the village—the departure of some of the members to live elsewhere—which is a severe blow to the status of the headman. In fact, he is dependent on his dependants for status, and the Yao are quick to point this out to neophyte headmen, saying, 'A tree cannot grow without branches.'

We can better understand the situation if we consider the social structure of the Yao village a little more closely. The Yao are a matrilineal people and are dominantly matrilocal. They live in small groups of huts scattered fairly evenly over the country and from a few hundred yards to possibly a mile or so apart. Such clusters may contain as few as five or as many as sixty or more huts, occupied by between 20 and 100 people.

These people are almost always kinsfolk, and in the smaller villages they are usually all either matrilineal descendants of a common ancestress or their spouses. In the larger groups there is a more complex situation which I shall analyse below. In the simpler groups there may be no male matrilineal descendant in the village and the leadership of the group is taken over by a senior female descendant of the founder of the village. Usually, however, if the group is large, one of the male matrilineal descendants lives patrilocally in the village and assumes leadership.

The relationship between a male matrilineal descendant and the female matrilineal descendants who are in his charge is signified by the word 'ubumbi'. The word particularly refers to the relationship between a man and his sisters and I have therefore translated it as 'matriliny group'. It includes a man's full sisters, matrilineal female collaterals (whom he calls sisters), their female children, and the female children of these female children, and so on. It is usually used in the sense of 'somebody's matriliny group'. A man belonging to the descent group of the matriliny group may refer to these women as 'our matriliny group'. The man who is in charge of the matriliny group is referred to as the *nyam ubumbi*. This could be translated as 'owner of the matriliny group' but because of the property connotations with the word 'owner' in our language, I have instead translated this as 'warden of the matriliny group' which expresses more accurately the relationship between a man and his female relatives. Even in those groups where there is a female in charge of the village and no male matrilineal descendant is resident in the group, there is usually some one man, possibly married in some other village, who is warden of the matriliny group. The warden of a matriliny group has certain precise duties to perform on behalf of his charges. First, he is concerned with the good relations between members of the matriliny group and with other such groups. He has to settle most of the domestic quarrels that take place between members of the matriliny groups. Second, and this is considered to be a most important function, he is the person who is the

marriage money for the marriages of the members of the group. Briefly this means that he must be approached before a marriage can be legally contracted by any member of his village, he or his representative is present at the ceremony which formally sanctions the marriage, and he is responsible for the behaviour of his female relatives in their marriage. Third, he is immediately concerned with the physical welfare and health of his security group. He must track down the sorcerers causing their illnesses and supply the medicine to heal them. He has to arrange for the ritual purification of sorcerers after the death of one of the security group's members. Fourth, he must be present in the court-house if one of his charges is involved in a case and he is usually looked to for the money for the fine. I have known a case not to begin because the warden of the security group was not present. Frequently if the husbands of the female members of his charge default, he has to provide the bot-tse money.

Usually the warden of the security group is the eldest brother of a group of adult full sisters. The youngest brothers of the group of sisters, while concerned with their welfare, do not stand in this particular responsible position. They refer to the security group as " our security group ". The eldest brother refers to the security group, he is wont, as " my security group ", and this sets him over and against his youngest brothers. The position that the warden holds, however, is not rigidly fixed, for a youngest brother may assume control of the security group if for some reason he is dissatisfied with the way in which affairs are being conducted, and is able so to assert himself.

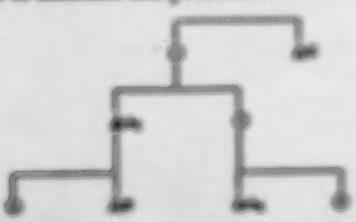
If we recall that the status of a man in a Yao community is determined by the number of dependants that he can command, it is easy to see that relationships between an elder brother and his younger brother are distinctive. The elder brother is responsible for the actions of his younger brother in much the same way as he is for one of his security group, and the younger brothers have a great emotional attachment to their elder brothers. Yet at the same time the elder brother stands in the way of the younger brother in his striving for status, in that while the elder brother is warden of the security group the younger brother cannot be, and therefore cannot have dependants and status. It is not surprising to find that accusations of sorcery are frequently made between brothers and the result often is that the younger brother takes the security group away from his successor brother to some other place and sets up a new village with it. Therefore, one possible source of instability in a Yao village lies in the opposition of the kinship system to a system of values which embraces status by allocation.

I have thus far been describing the simpler type of village. In the larger groups it is common for the warden of the security group to live in the village where his security group is. There he usually brings one (or sometimes more) of his wives to the village, where she lives patrilocally. The daughters that are born to her do not remain in the security group from which the headman's wife came but marry and set up households near their mother in the village of their father. Thus there develops in time a second security group in the village, alongside the first security group, and related to it through the headman. At this point we may say that the man's position has changed from that of headman of a village containing a single security group, to the more complicated and less secure one of village headman over a more hetero-

genous group, in which his jurisdiction over one part of the village arises from his position as the warden of a seniority group, and that which he exercises over the other seniority group derives partly from his position as a non-matrilineal relative and partly from his own personal qualities. The warden of the second seniority group is the headman's own son and it is he who takes over all the functions proper to that position, but the successor to the headmanship is a man's sister's son, usually, though not inevitably, the first-born son of the eldest sister. Each village headman in turn brings his wife to live in his village and each headman's wife in turn tends to set up a kinship group which is of a different lineage affiliation from that of the headman. In addition to this the warden of the seniority group formed from the first headman's children tends in due course to live patrilocally and the children of his wife set up yet another foreign group in the village. Hence, theoretically, with each generation the number of opposed groups in a village doubles itself, and in a few generations, were this to continue, the position would become extremely complex. In fact a village of long standing is seen to be composed of a central lineage group to which the headman belongs, and a series of other lineage groups related to the headman's lineage group through one or other of the past and present headmen of that village. Such groups of different lineage make-up are usually mutually opposed and are held together only by the combined influences of a weak patrilineal connection with the headman's lineage and the personality of the present headman.

This situation is clearly an uneasy one for the headman. His wife is looked upon as a stranger and is often made to feel it. The headman's seniority group often expresses its hostility and jealousy towards her. The children of the two groups are on an easier footing. They call each other "cross-cousin" (jukuan) and are supposed to marry one another. At the same time the hostility between them is formalized in joking relationships. This critical situation of the headman is made clear to him on the day of his succession. One headman was told: "As you have got wives, do not listen to what they say. They may be lying. Sometimes they will quarrel with your sisters and say that your sisters have been insulting you. This is false. When you hear these reports you may be unfair to your sisters and the people will say that you have broken your village through listening to women." Thus when conflicts arise between members of a village the headman is in a peculiar position and it is difficult for him to remain impartial. In such a situation the tendency is to call in an outsider to try to settle the differences. Sometimes these differences are patched up and the village continues as a unit. But, particularly after the death of the first village headman, the tendency is for one of the groups to move away to a completely new area, there to set up a unit of its own.

I quote an actual case to illustrate this procedure:



'In 1946 village A had about 30 huts in it. A certain man B was the son of the previous headman called A_1 and hence mother's brother's son or cross-cousin of the present headman called A_2. B had two wives living patrilocally and while B was serving in the Army he had a letter from one of his sisters (i.e. his mother's brother's daughter or cross-cousin to the headman) to say that A_2 was sleeping with B's wives. When B returned he started making inquiries from his wives and he eventually secured a confession from them. B then went to a man called C, who stood in the relationship of mother's brother to the original A_1 and complained about the behaviour of the village headman. C also instituted inquiries and ascertained that it was true. C then approached a local headman of some standing (whom I shall call D) and asked him to arbitrate in the case. D pronounced A_2 guilty and awarded compensation of £6. 10s. to B. B, however, refused to take the money, and said that he wished to leave the village. D observed that he had every right to do this and that A_2 had no right to complain 'since he had broken the village himself'. B took his matrilineage-group, who comprised about twenty of the thirty huts, to a place about thirty miles away and set up a village of his own. The matrilineage-group of the village headman A_2 remained behind in the old village.'

This case illustrates the points that I have made. It shows how the two groups in this village stood opposed to each other in that B's sisters were to tell him of A_2's conduct. Also when the village did break up it did so along certain very clear lines of genealogical relationship. Second, it illustrates the operation of the desire for dependents in that B refused what by Yao standards is a very large sum of money for compensation and preferred to move off and establish a village of his own. This attitude is also shown by the arbitrator who takes the point of view that regrettable as it is, the village must in the circumstances split, and while he appreciates the headman's feelings he makes it clear that the headman has no one to blame but himself. Third, it is interesting to note that this split took place after the death of the old village headman when the personal ties with both opposed groups were severed. Though the new village headman A_2 assumes the kinship terms of his predecessor and also calls the children of A_1 'children' yet in fact he is their cross-cousin while the old village headman was their father.

The position of the village headman in Yao social structure may be summarized thus: the village headman is the leader of a group which may be a simple kin-group or a composite group of two or more opposed matrilineages linked to each other through himself or one of his predecessors whom he represents to them. The numerical size of the village determines the status of the headman, but the size that it can reach is limited by an inherent instability in the kinship structure which is expressed, in terms of their status system, first, in the competition of headmen for the membership of the matrilineage group, and second, in the competition between the headmen and the members of the patrilineally linked matrilineage groups, who wish to set up villages of their own.

The Yao are villagers as units and this is clearly shown at the initiation ceremonies of boys, when the initiates are kept in grass sheds, each partition of which refers to a particular village. In the same way a person is identified as belonging to a particular village known by the name of the village headman. Thus a man might say: 'I come from Kanyumba's village.'

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Village headmen themselves are graded in importance and there are certain marks of rank which distinguish the more important headmen. We have already mentioned one of the most obvious ways in which the village headman's importance is judged, that is, by the number of people in his village. In addition there are other ways in which village headmen may be distinguished both from the common people and from less important headmen. Thus, for example, many of the more important village headmen have the right to conduct initiation ceremonies, this right being granted to them by the man who is in a way the most important village headman of all—the Chief. The right to hold a boys' initiation ceremony (*lipando*) is of more importance than the right to hold a girls' initiation ceremony (*chipoko*). Yet another mark of rank is the right to wear a plain crimson band around the forehead (*mlongoti*), this right also being granted by the Chief.

The Administration has recognized the more important village headmen and has entrusted to them certain duties. By no means all the people called "village headmen" in this paper are recognized as such by the Administration, but I do not know of any person who has the right to wear a red band and is not also an Administrative village headman.

The status system has apparently been taken over from pre-European days, but it is uncertain to what extent these important village headmen had powers. Some to-day have all the marks of rank that the Chief has, i.e., they hold both boys' and girls' initiation ceremonies, are entitled to the special greeting accorded to important village headmen (*mkulu*), wear a red band, have the right to be buried in the village and not in the common cemeteries, and to have their bodies prepared for interment by people of similar rank. It appears that such people exercised a certain amount of power, by reason of their personal qualities, over less powerful neighbours, and some were able in the past to demonstrate their autonomy by moving off to establish petty chiefdoms of their own.

Nowadays the Administrative village headmen have certain statutory duties to perform towards other minor groups actually independent but considered, for the purposes of the Administration, to belong to the village. The relative importance of the headmen is still the deciding factor in such questions as determining who is to be called in to arbitrate in a case. Thus, though for Administrative purposes a small village may be considered to be a part of a larger Administrative village under an Administrative village headman, yet when a case for arbitration occurs within that smaller village, some other person than the Administrative village headman may be called in to arbitrate.

Laws promulgated by the Administration are conveyed through the Chief to the Administrative village headmen and in this way a hierarchy of power is being introduced. The small village headmen now see the Administrative village headmen as a representative of the Chief and the Administration. The Administrative village headmen in turn see the Chief in this light. But in matters directly affecting the Administration, the small village headmen also see the Administrative village headmen as his own representative *vis-à-vis* the Chief and the Administration.

In general the village is by far the most important corporate body in the social organization of the Yao, not only as a significant primary group but also as an element

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§22. in the political sphere. The position of the village headman therefore is of continual importance and merits further study.

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III. THE PORT JAMESON NGONI